

11th May 2020

Dear Principal

I hope you and your staff are well during these unprecedented times. There is nothing usual about this academic year and I am sure the 2020/21 year will also have its unexpected challenges. The Board of AQE has been closely monitoring the coronavirus situation and the real difficulties and uncertainty it has posed for parents, pupils and schools alike over recent weeks, particularly in relation to home schooling and pressures of work. To allow this year's cohort of P6 pupils the opportunity to catch up with direct curriculum teaching, and after consultation with some Primary and Post Primary Principals, the Board wrote to the Minister of Education on 17th April proposing to postpone the usual November AQE assessment until January 2021. I, along with the Chairman, Mr Ian Noad, engaged with officials of the Department on 24th April and 1st May, and with the Minister and officials on 5th May, to explore the possibility of accommodating such a delay within the time frame of the official Transfer process. AQE acknowledges the Minister's firm support for academic selection and both parties examined in good faith a number of differing options. However, for logistical reasons, it was reluctantly recognised that such an accommodation would not be possible and the Department was unable to accede to AQE's proposal.

It would be clearly unacceptable to stage the assessment during the immediate period leading up to Christmas, which would also involve prolonging it after the holidays into early January 2021. **Therefore, the Board has decided to re-schedule the AQE assessment for the Saturdays of 21st and 28th November, and 12th December 2020.** This will provide pupils with an extra two weeks of preparation compared to the original dates planned before the onslaught of coronavirus.

Parents and pupils will be encouraged to know that the three paper AQE assessment, with only the best two papers contributing to a candidate's score, is designed to allow pupils to have an "off day". In addition, the Age Standardisation procedure will take into account a lower overall level of performance, thus enabling a lower individual mark to achieve a standardised score of 100. The Special Circumstances procedure will also continue to apply for those pupils who have not performed to the expected standard and have experienced uniquely disadvantageous circumstances in the lead up to, or during, the test period.

In the following paragraphs I have highlighted a number of important points relating to the Common Entrance Assessments (CEAs) for the next academic year. The most important change to the process is the move to **online registrations** for candidates.

1. Enclosed Documents

I enclose with this letter a copy of the Key Information Document which should provide you with most of the dates and deadlines for this cycle. Due to this year's unusual circumstances, we will be using an online Registration Form for the first time. The form is accessible from the website (www.aqe.org.uk). **Please let your parents know that after registration opens on Thursday 14th May 2020, they can complete an online form together with payment of the fee**

(£55). An electronic version of the pupil's photograph and a scanned copy of the original birth certificate can be uploaded to the online form. Please also ask the parents to be patient when completing the form as this is the first time we have used it and there may be access issues in the early days of registration. On completion of the form the parents will receive a confirmation email. Please note that special access arrangement documentation should not be uploaded to the online form, this can be sent in hard copy to the AQE Office. Whilst we strongly advise parents to register using the online form, a version of the form will be available on the AQE website which can be printed and completed by hand (a copy is attached to this email). The form can then be posted to the AQE Office. Please note that due to the lockdown conditions, paper forms received by the AQE Office will take much longer to process than the online forms. **Registration will now close on Friday 25th September 2020.**

2. Places available in assessment centres

Parents or guardians can choose in which of the participating schools they would prefer their child to sit the CEA. This, as you will know, need not be the school to which they intend to apply later for a place. The earlier children apply, the more certain they can be of securing their first choice centre. If they leave their application until August or September, it becomes increasingly difficult to place them as centres fill up. It is essential, therefore, that parents place four centres in order of preference on the registration form. Places are particularly tight in urban areas and parents who have circumstances which make travelling difficult should submit a Registration Form early to prevent difficulties.

In an attempt to ensure that all registered candidates will be accommodated, we have again secured four 'overflow' centres in the Lisburn campus of the South Eastern Regional College, the Titanic Quarter and Castlereagh campuses of the Belfast Metropolitan College and the fourth overflow centre is situated at Lagan College. Lagan College is not a member of AQE, but has given us permission to use the wonderful facilities on the campus. All overflow centres will be operated by AQE personnel and are designed to absorb candidates who have not been accommodated in any of our member schools.

3. Late Registration

Last year we had to deal with a high number of registrations which were submitted after the deadline, creating problems both for the Office and the grammar schools, particularly in accommodating candidates who require special access arrangements. We are taking steps to reduce the amount of time needed for processing, but we will also be stricter about enforcing the deadline. **Apart from imposing a late entry fee, we will process only registration forms and special access applications where the lateness can be justified by extenuating circumstances.**

4. Access Arrangements

The Access Arrangements application form (ACC/20) can be downloaded from our website along with the relevant Guidance Notes. These documents can also be obtained from the AQE Office when it reopens after lockdown. More information can be found in the Key Information Document and there are also FAQs specific to Access Arrangements available on our website, under the section 'Access Arrangements'.

5. Cost and online payment

The fee to sit the Assessment this year is £55 of which £35 is non-refundable if the CEA tests were to be, unfortunately, cancelled due to coronavirus. Given the current situation, we strongly recommend that parents pay the registration fee online; further details can be found on the 'Registration' section of our website. There will be no fee for children on Free School Meals when they provide confirmation of their entitlement from the Education Authority; we should be most grateful if you would stress this to those parents to whom it is applicable. We cannot accept confirmation of Tax Credits as evidence, nor can we accept copies of the application copy sent by parents to the Education Authority. Where the letter from the Education Authority is unavailable, and if you are happy to do so, we will accept a letter from your school confirming a child is currently on the Free School Meals register as proof of entitlement.

6. Results

The results will be published on Saturday 30th January 2021. We hope that the opportunity to receive the results directly by post at your home and by email, as well as at the School, has proved helpful. Some Principals have expressed a preference for receiving the results at a different time than Friday evening, so in order to gauge opinion I will email you separately at a later date offering different options (it will only be possible to send the results out at the same time to all Principals) with a simple majority vote accepted. I need to stress that the scores **must not be divulged to candidates in advance of the postal delivery.**

7. GDPR compliance

Due to GDPR compliance parents will have to 'opt-in' to allow us to send their child's results to their Primary School. The Education Authority may be ready with an online admissions process for 2020/21 which would require pupil scores to be attached to the online form. For this reason, parents will also be asked to provide consent for the final scores and pupil details to be sent to the Education Authority. This information is only sent to schools and the Education Authority if parental consent has been provided. The opportunities to 'opt-in' can be found on the Registration Form.

Thank you for your continuing support. We endeavour to maintain high standards in the service we offer, so if you have any comments, queries or suggestions about our procedures, assessments or communications, please do not hesitate to contact us via the AQE Office (when it reopens) or, if you wish to contact me directly, my email address is ceo@aqe.org.uk.

Best wishes for the days and weeks ahead.



Dr Darrin Barr (Joint C.E.O.)